# Legal services for poor facing statewide cuts

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) - The loss of $1.36 million could mean the state's legal services for the poor will lose six of their 21 regional offices, the head of a poverty-law resource center said.

It could also mean the loss of some of the 72 lawyers in Kentucky for the program commonly called "Legal Aid," as well as legal assistants and other staff.

"This is a major funding crisis for legal aid throughout the state," said Jamie Hamon, executive director of the Access to Justice Foundation, a statewide poverty-law resource center in Lexington.

Legal Aid provides noncriminal legal assistance to the poor in areas such as family law, consumer fraud, housing evictions and foreclosures.

Statewide, Legal Aid will lose about $800,000 in federal funds - a cut of about 13 percent from the $6 million it got this year from the federal Legal Services Corp., which provides most of the money for Legal Aid.

The state also is facing the loss of about $460,000 - nearly all the grant money it gets through the federal Violence Against Women Act - for legal services for poor women who suffer domestic violence. In addition, because of lower interest rates, it is facing a decline of about $100,000 in funds from interest collected on lawyers' trust accounts.

Hamon said directors of Kentucky's four Legal Aid programs still are reviewing the cuts.

Scott Crocker, executive director of Kentucky Legal Aid, which serves western and southern Kentucky, said his office will lose about $260,000 out of a budget of about $2.2 million. All of the agency's clients are poor, and many are elderly or disabled, he said.

The Louisville region is facing the potential loss of three or four staff members because of the cuts, said Dennis Bricking, executive director of the Louisville Legal Aid Society, which serves Jefferson and 14 surrounding counties. The cuts will come at a time when the demand for services is increasing.

Bricking said he expects to lose about $170,000 out of an annual budget of about $3 million.

Hamon said Legal Aid offices are forced to prioritize cases. For example, they are more likely to take on eviction cases or domestic-violence cases if there are children involved and foreclosure

cases when an elderly person has been the victim of fraud and risks losing a home.

Unless Congress increases funding, Kentucky will lose about $800,000 in 2003 from the federal program that supports Legal Aid because funds are tied to each state's poverty rate. Kentucky's poverty rate declined about 3 percent under the latest Census data.

States like Kentucky where poverty declined slightly suffered cuts because other large states had significant increases in poverty and will drain additional federal money from the Legal Services fund, Hamon said.

An amendment to a Senate appropriations bill offered by Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, that would increase federal Legal Aid funding is pending, but its passage is uncertain, Bricking said.

Legal Aid officials are particularly worried about impoverished areas of the state, such as eastern Kentucky, served by the Appalachian Research and Defense Fund, or APPALRED.

"What you've got is poor people with acute legal needs not being able to have those needs met," said Ernie Lewis, head of the state public-defender system and a board member of APPALRED. "I think each board and each executive director are going to have to reduce services for poor people."

He said he expects APPALRED to see a $600,000 cut in its $4 million budget. Legal Aid of the Bluegrass, which serves the Lexington area and northern Kentucky, could not be reached for an estimate on its cuts.

Next year, Kentucky will lose almost $500,000 in grants through the federal Violence Against Women Act used to provide legal assistance to poor women who are victims of domestic violence. The U.S. Justice Department declined to renew those grants under new policies that direct the money to start-up programs instead of funding existing programs, Hamon said.